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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of high school dropouts ages 16-24 in a rural county in Illinois. Specifically, the study reports on descriptive data pertaining to high school dropouts, focusing on those who chose to return to education; changes in student views and perceptions regarding education; and efforts by the school system to encourage dropouts to return to school. Surveys were completed by 115 dropouts who had either returned to high school or were enrolled in a GED program or vocational/training program. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 52 dropouts, including 12 who failed to return to education altogether, and with principals, counselors, and teachers. The proportion of minority dropouts was slightly higher than their representation in the student population. In addition, the proportion of special education students among the dropouts was twice their proportion in all secondary students in the county. Few dropouts interviewed reported success at work, starting a family, or having a good time. These experiences along with changes in personal views and attitudes regarding educational benefits prompted students to return to education. However, those who returned to high school returned to the same environment that they had left, in many cases with memories of failure and frustration. Therefore, it was not surprising that only 35 percent of dropouts returned to high school, while 60 percent returned to a GED program. Students who failed to return to education faced severe or complicated obstacles, such as age, substance abuse, or extreme delinquency, that made returning almost impossible. Other reasons for not returning included childcare needs, viewing work and money as a priority, and perceiving school as unchallenging or boring. Interviews with principals, school counselors, and teachers revealed that the school system did not prevent dropouts from returning to school should they chose to do so, but had no policies about establishing contact with dropouts to encourage or attract them to return. Includes recommendations for addressing the needs of dropouts. (LP)

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When Do High School Dropouts Return to Education and Why?

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Introduction

For decades society has been concerned with the issue of high school dropouts in America in view of the personal, social and economic consequences of this phenomenon.

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) (1986) has reported on the extent and nature of the dropout problem and indicated that the overall dropout rate for the last decade, for youth, ages 16 to 20, remained the same, approximately 13-14% and that as of October 1985 there were about 4.3 million dropouts in this country.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), recently reported an event dropout rate for 1993, of 4.5%, of students aged 15-24, in grades 10-12. (McMillen, Kaufman, & Whitener, 1994). In absolute numbers the event dropout of that year for grades 10-12 totaled approximately 381,000. According to the same report, the status dropout rate, namely, the proportion of individuals at any given time, who are not enrolled in school and have not completed high school, in October 1993, reached 11% for individuals between 16-24 years old. This proportion means that 3.4 million persons did not complete high school that year.

Given the severe personal and societal consequences of dropping out it is not surprising that much of the research on the dropout problem has been focused on student characteristics, causes for dropping out of high school, and other related social and economic aspects of the problem (Finn, 1989). Very few studies have addressed the process of "returning" to school to achieve a high school equivalency certificate or to pursue a training or vocational program (Rumberger, 1990). Information on the extent and characteristics of "returnees" is provided through national surveys, such as the High School and Beyond (HS&B) Survey, The National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88) or through enrollment in specific programs like the General Education Development (GED) program, or vocational training programs directed to dropouts.

A brief review of the data pertaining to returning students to some sort of education reveals the following facts. Based on the HS&B Survey, second follow-up, (1984), about 50% of the population who dropped out during 1980-82 returned to school or were enrolled in GED classes by 1984. Thirty-eight percent of these completed their

high school requirements for a diploma by 1984, that is, 2 years later than their original cohort (Kolstad & Owings, 1986; Kolstad & Kaufman, 1989). Data from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, Stern & Chandler (1988) report that while 75% of all 18- and 19-year-olds have completed high school, the proportion for 20- to 24-year-olds is around 84%, that is an increase of 9% of graduates. This rate has remained the same since 1974. In addition, the *Forgotten Half* Interim Report (1988) notes that by age 29 more than 86% of young people earn a high school diploma or a GED, 14% do not - that is approximately the regular status dropout rate. This data indicates not only that it takes more time to complete high school requirements for many students, but that dropout problems are not permanent conditions for a relatively large group of youth on the outside.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to present the main findings of a naturalistic study conducted in a rural county in Illinois, during the 1990 school year. The paper will focus on (a) descriptive data pertaining to the high school dropouts, mainly those who returned to education and were surveyed; (b) questions dealing with changes in students views and perceptions, particularly as manifested by their decisions concerning education, training or work, trying to understand the substance of these changes as well as when, why and how they occur; (c) questions related to the education system's efforts (teachers, principals, counselors, etc.) to encourage dropouts returning to school.

Data Collection: Sources and Methods

Research activities emphasized qualitative methods for collecting data. A telephone-home survey combined with home visits, of 259 dropouts, served to identify those students who returned to school and those who did not. Subjects were limited to 16 to 24 years of age. Questionnaires including multiple-choice and open-ended questions were filled in by returning students who were located in high schools, in General

Educational Development (GED) programs, or other vocational/training programs. In addition to the 115 questionnaires collected, 52 in-depth interviews were conducted with dropout students using a purposeful sampling method. Of these a small group of non-returnees, or students who failed to return was interviewed (N=12). Principals and counselors in the 11 schools of the county, and a sample of 12 teacher were interviewed as well. Table 1 presents data on the dropout population and those students surveyed.

The questionnaire used for the telephone survey served the home-survey when telephone communication was not possible. The survey's results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Number and Percent of Dropout Population Surveyed (Dec. 1989 - March 1990) Compared to the Total Dropout Population of the 1988-89 School Year.

		Total Dropout Population		Number of Dropouts Surveyed		% of Total
		n	%	n	%	
Total		259	(100)	158	(100)	61
Sex	Male	147	(57)	90	(57)	61
	Female	112	(43)	68	(43)	61
Ethnic	Caucasian	212	(82)	130	(82)	61
Group	Black	41	(16)	24	(15)	59
	Hispanic	6	(2)	4	(3)	67
Special Education		38	(15)	21	(13)	55

Data indicate that the proportion of minority dropouts was about 18% with 82% Caucasians. For the year surveyed the minority rate for high school students in the county was 14%. Namely, the proportion of minorities among the dropouts was slightly higher than their representation in the total population of high school students.

Particular attention should be given to the dropout rate found among special education students. Although the survey revealed a proportion of 15% of special education students among the dropouts their proportion at the secondary school level was only about 7.5%. In other words, the proportion of special education students among the total dropouts was twice their proportion in all secondary school students in the county.

Results

When Do Dropouts Return to Education and Why?

Billy returned to high school after having dropped out for a semester during the 11th grade. Though he had a fairly well paying starting job in the construction industry, it took him no more than five to six months to realize that he needed an education to advance. He was interested in construction but wanted to be more than a "go-fer" and do more than fetch and carry. Billy put his finger on what he was missing: "I needed more experience to do different jobs..., so I thought I'd come back to high school to get my diploma and then go on for higher education."

Once Billy was actually back in school and had become a candidate for the Marine Corps he was motivated more than ever to get a diploma so that he could actually enlist. He had a clear goal, a positive sense of his capabilities, and pride in his plans for the future. Billy was ready to stay in school for an extra semester to complete the credits required for the high school diploma.

Michelle left school at the 9th grade. Lagging behind in credits, she knew she would have a hard time graduating and besides, she was pregnant and the other students made fun of her. She thought she might graduate through a GED, but it seemed a far off goal. Michelle stayed home for three months, bored and unemployed. Then when she heard that her neighbor was taking the GED she decided to try it herself. Not only was she pregnant but by her own admission she had been a poor student, "I didn't take Algebra because I wasn't good enough." She was therefore worried that she would fail. But her neighbor's experience encouraged her: "... I figured I'll give it a shot. A lot of people start it... I'll try it anyway. So I did...."

Tracy's case was more complicated. Coming from a broken home, Tracy hung out with a bad crowd and got involved in drugs, married early and was pregnant by the age of 17. Her story, as she told it, was impressive. She explained her many problems and in retrospect analyzed her situation very clearly. She seemed to be very self-confident in assuming responsibility for her life. She stopped using drugs, divorced her husband who had gotten her onto them in the first place, and tried to rehabilitate her life. At that time she felt bored. Her mother got custody of her twins and she did not want to just sit around. But it took the birth of another son before she felt the need to go back to school.

> *When my other son was born, then everything changed. I realized that I had to do something with my life... I didn't want him to someday feel bad because his mother didn't finish high school. I just knew I had to do it... I started to worry about their [her babies] future and my future and my boyfriend's future. Their father, college, etc.*

With the future in mind, she joined the GED program and enrolled in college courses as well. It took her four years from the time she left school to return.

Mike had been a good football player in high school. When he dropped out he felt lonely and isolated. He dropped out for a semester and looked for a job, then at his mother's urges went back-only to drop out again. The reason he gave was that he would have to attend school for another two years and: "I didn't want to graduate at the same time as my sister."

But it may be suggested that his impulsiveness, lack of self-discipline, involvement with the school gangs (though he denied it), and, above all, his lack of any clear goal and motivating drive were behind that unwillingness to make the effort.

These four cases are all different in the type of person, their motives for leaving school and the circumstances that brought them back. Yet they have common components that shape the "experience" of the dropout.

Most dropouts feel an extremely strong and powerful sense of being on the outside. I interviewed over fifty students, some of whom returned to education and some of whom did not, and talked informally with about a hundred. The most widespread aspect of the "dropout experience" was the entirely unexpected and even shading realization that they

had placed themselves on the outside and put themselves off not only from their friends at school but their entire social milieu. They felt isolated, and that they did not belong. Many of them may have enjoyed an initial sense of freedom or independence, though they did not generally know exactly what to do with it. But the survey I conducted showed that most dropouts were unhappy about being on the outside and some even felt angry. In their interviews many returnees told that being out of school was fun at first. They could sleep late and no one told them what to do. But soon they became bored, frustrated, especially when they could not find a decently paid job. One dropout told:

> *I was having fun, I was free, no one was telling me what to do. Then after the first month I started missing some of my friends from school, and I started missing school.*

Another told:

> *I was out for half a year... and trying to raise my baby... I wanted to come back, I was bored sitting at home. I wanted to come back and get all my credits. Also I thought it was right. It was right to come back.*

Yet another gave his social isolation and rejection as the reason that

> *... just my friends' parents. They didn't like me, they didn't want their kids around me, cause I wasn't in school, and they would always say well he ain't gonna be nothing unless he goes back to school. If he goes back to school I might run around with him a little bit. So I kind of come back.*

Even a dropout who had not gone back to school by the time of the interview and who was not even considering GED, had nothing good to say about being out of school. I wasn't satisfied at all. Actually I was disgusted with myself.

Most dropouts I interviewed experienced some kind of pivotal event or realization that led them to turn to school. Billy's turning point came when he realized that to get anywhere in the construction business, he would need not only a high school diploma but a college degree as well. In Michelle's life the pivotal point was probably learning that her neighbor was working on her GED. This gave her the boost she needed to try the GED despite her weak academic background and lack of self-confidence. For Tracy, the turning point came with the birth of another son. As she explained it "I grew older and I am a mother, not a teenager anymore... Suddenly education became very important..." Though it took her four years from the time she dropped out, she finally took responsibility for her and her children's lives. Mike, in contrast, seems not to have

experienced any special realization or turn. Though he felt an outsider and missed his friends and the football team he did not decide to return to school on his own. He went back only because his mother pressured him. Maybe this explains why he gave up so easily and soon dropped out a second time. When they were asked what could be done to help dropouts return to school, most of the respondents clearly stated that the student was the one who had to make the decision and stick by it.

On the survey questionnaires, the returnees noted the following changes in themselves that made them decide to return to education (95 respondents):

1. Wanting a better job and a better life	29	31%
2. Being more motivated to get an education	19	20%
3. Feeling uneducated	15	16%
4. Assuming the responsibilities of parenthood	11	12%
5. Realizing the benefits of money, valuing money	9	8%
6. Being self supporting	7	7%
7. Being encouraged by people	5	5%

Other changes cited by respondents were: becoming decisive, feeling the threat of unemployment, feeling more mature.

In and of themselves, these overlapping developments were not enough to make the dropout to go back to school, though, nor was the discomfort of their outsider status. Some critical incident such as the birth of a new baby, a friend's example, the loss of a job, the failure to get a promotion for lack of adequate qualifications, strong advice by the police, the graduation of friends, etc. seemed to be needed, and the dropouts spoke of them as essential.

One of the questions on the questionnaire was: Why return to school? Many responses to this question were job related (i.e., get a better job, be promoted at a current job). Others involved the quality of life, the wish for a better life for themselves and their children, on the desire for self-improvement. Others mentioned the need to complete high school or the equivalent in order to further their education.

The Meaning of Returning to School as Perceived by the Student

Though going to school is the norm in adolescence, returning after having dropped out is far from easy. It is difficult in any case and all the more so for students who had left because they failed courses or were expelled.

There is a significant difference, though, between returning to high school and enrolling in an alternate program, such as a GED or a vocational training program.

Going back to high school, generally means returning the same environment which the student left, in some cases with memories of failure and frustration. An alternate program provides the opportunity to start again without the baggage of the past, but poses its own problems: an unfamiliar setting, unknown requirements and people one does not know.

Data received through the telephone survey revealed that 75 of the 158 dropout students (48%) returned to some sort of education the first year after they left high school as shown in Table 2. Of these returnees, 18 (24%) graduated at the end of the year, five from high school and 13 through a GED program.

Table 2: Number and Percent of Returnees and Non-Returnees by Sex and Ethnic Group.

		Returnees		Non-Returnees		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Total		75	(48)	83	(53)	158	(100)
Sex	Male	37	(41)	53	(59)	90	(100)
	Female	38	(56)	30	(44)	68	(100)
Ethnic	Caucasian	64	(49)	66	(51)	130	(100)
Group	Black	10	(42)	14	(58)	24	(100)
	Hispanic	1	(25)	3	(75)	4	(100)
Special Education		7	(33)	14	(67)	21	(100)

These survey data also indicate that females returned to some form of education more than males (56% versus 41%) and proportionately more Caucasians returned than minority groups. Some 49% of all Caucasian dropouts had returned to education in the period of the study; 42% of the Black dropouts and 25% of Hispanic had returned.

Although the rate of returning among Black dropouts in this survey was lower than the Caucasian dropouts (49% versus 42%). It is important to note that nationally there was an increase of 19% between 1972 to 1981, in the rate of high school completion for Black students. In 1993 it reached 89% for Black dropouts ages 29-30 years (McMillen, Kaufman & Whitener, 1994). As for Hispanic dropouts, the result of this survey indicate that one out of four dropouts returned to education. Presumably, the reasons for returning would be different for each ethnic group. This aspect was beyond the scope of this study.

At least 29 students told that they tried to return to formal schooling but had not been able to. For students who left in the latter part of their high school career, returning to school or to a GED program seem an attainable goal and graduating within reach. For those who dropped out early on in high school going back meant a long haul and required considerable readjustment in which they had to relearn to comply with school regulations and re-acquire study habits. It was apparent that in many cases these students lacked the confidence to overcome their previous failures in school and were not yet sufficiently disillusioned with the dropout experience. For some returning was not yet a viable alternative: "I never think about going back" some said.

With the exception of teenage parents, young dropouts who preferred the GED option had to wait till they were eighteen or till their class had graduated to enroll. Dropouts who were employed full time found it difficult to plan returning, and sometimes did so only after they had "made some money." In some cases students did not return simply because no one ever suggested that they should.

The survey revealed three main options for returning students, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Returnees by Type of Program

Type of Program	Total
High School	26 (35)
GED Program	45 (60)
Other	4 (5)

Note: Numbers in parenthesis represent percents.

The majority of students returned to a GED program, 45 students (60%). This was cited as the shortest option leading to a high school equivalency and the most flexible, allowing the returnee to take classes at convenient hours. Some students also preferred the program's "personal approach." Moreover, though none of the students specifically mentioned the fact that the GED gives them a set of "clear goals" it was quite evident that this too was a major attraction, since the program prepares the dropouts for the tests required for graduation.

Twenty six (35%) of the returning dropouts went back to their former or similar schools. This option has numerous drawbacks. It tends to be more time consuming than a GED. Students must be prepared to make up lost credits by taking extra courses, which may keep them in school for an extra year or semester beyond their original cohort. It also requires the returnee who may have gotten used to a certain freedom to adjust e.g., discipline of getting up in the morning and adhering to a fixed schedule. As one interviewee put it:

> *I think the hardest thing was getting up in the morning and making it here on time. I still don't make it here on time. Also, getting adjusted to coming back to school and getting back into the routine...*

Other problems include the stigma of past conduct and of having dropped out and the unpleasantness of "uncooperative teachers"--as Mike called them--who remember the returnee's inglorious past. Ridicule of fellow students can also make life unpleasant for the dropout who goes back to high school. As Mike put it:

> *... with some students, talk spreads real fast. Some kids come up to me and ask, "How many credits you got Mike? Nine and you're a junior?" I didn't want to go*

back in school. I said forget it. I just gave up on it. I don't care if I was good in sports or not.

He fantasized going back to another school where he would be free of "all that criticism," but, as noted above, never did. The criticism is almost inevitable when returnees take classes below their age level and with younger pupils. As another returnee put it:

kids laughed at you. They'd say "you're 19 and you're still in school. You're stupid. You shouldn't have quit."

Sometimes this criticism, expressed by students in school invites aggressive reactions on the part of returnees. Returnees would expect their peers to be much more understanding and to identify with them, thereby encouraging them. Therefore aggressive reaction on the part of returnees should be understood much more as a defensive stand justifying their decision to return to school. The peer groups should be guided in advance to socially accept and even assist the returnees upon their return.

At the same time, returning to high school, especially after a short absence of only a few weeks to a few months, can be seen as an admission that leaving school was a mistake and that life on the outside for the non-graduate is really hard. Dropouts may feel that they failed both in school and out of school. The fear of failing yet again when they return tends to be very strong and very pervasive. Michelle told her fear of starting all over again:

... I just don't think I would go back [to high school] because I don't think I can, it would be hard, like kindergarten the first time, or something. To me it would be like starting over again, even if it is for a short time.

Another returning student was blunter:

I was a little scared at first, scared of failing. I tried to do my best. Everybody tried to help but mostly it was myself.

The stigma, the isolation, the weight of past failure, and the fear of failing again add to the other problems of going back to school in any framework: the need to develop proper self-discipline and study habits. It is certainly no wonder, then, that along with their shame at having dropped out many returnees express strong and genuine pride in finally taking the challenge and getting a degree. "They didn't go through what I went through" one returnee told of the kids in her school who were going straight through to

their degree without ever having dropped out. "They don't know... I did what a lot of older kids don't do. I came back.." Even more explicitly, Tracy said "When I did it, I felt proud."

Why Not Return to School?

The many facets of returning to education were central in this study. To better understand the phenomenon I considered it important to explore why some individuals chose not to return to school. Two youth perspectives were examined: that of students who stayed in school and that of dropouts who had not returned at the time the research activities took place.

Non-Dropouts

The following quotes express the views of some non-dropout students questioned about dropouts during my meetings with them:

> *I think they care, it's just hard for them to come back. Sometimes when they come back, they are so much older....*
>
> *I think that most of the people who drop out, they don't have the kind of friends that are going to help them. Now, most of us we wouldn't drop out of school, but the people who don't want to be there in the first place, they are not going to want to come back, and their friends are not going to want to help them come back....*
>
> *It is not easy to quit and then come back to school, because everyone is going to hassle you and the teachers are not going to care about you, because half of the teachers think that since you quit you don't care. It's like if he comes back, give him another chance because nobody cares, you are just nothing.*

When referring to teenage mothers one student commented:

> *I think most people really don't care. I think most of them would like to come back, but they have the child and they don't have anybody to watch it, and they don't have money for baby-sitters. They have to spend time at home with them, and most of them would probably rather take care of the child themselves anyway, and they feel like they should spend time with their child.*

Other students said that "dropouts do not care," "school is not so important for them," "school is a waste of time," "they don't want to try again where they failed" or "their parents are not at home to help them." One student elaborated: "They put up with enough pressure and they don't want to anymore, so they don't go back. I mean why go back to something that you are not happy with?"

Students who remained in school believed that it is possible to return to school but it is extremely difficult; one needs to be quite serious in order to succeed. The statements presented above express very clearly the opinions of those who are in school - that once you drop it is too difficult to return. It is a matter of building a new self-image, which is no easy task. A returnee should not expect that teachers or classmates will be more helpful than they had been previously. Moreover, the friends of dropouts will probably not encourage them to return to school because they themselves are on the outside. This peer influence may contribute to a dropout's decision not to return. The view of staying students concerning the return of teenage mothers is compatible with what young mothers who did not return said about themselves, in an earlier section.

It is interesting that among the non-dropout students whom I met with for group discussions, not one of them expressed the idea that the school should be responsible for making changes in order to assist dropouts in their return to school.

Students Who Did Not Return

I met with twelve students for individual interviews in order to hear their own words regarding their experiences of not returning to their education. Based on the notes recorded and data from questionnaires, I found that various reasons contributed to the decision to drop out: home environment, peer pressure, pregnancy, low academic performance and loss of credits, not getting along with teachers or students, delinquency, drugs and alcohol, or violent behavior. I roughly identified three main groups of students:

1. Those whose circumstances of dropping out were so severe and complicated that returning to education was the least possible alternative (those involved in violence, drugs or severe offenses and those who lost too many credits);

2. Those who at the time of the study (or for an intermediate period) had other priorities than returning to education (i.e., taking care of a baby);

3. Those dropouts, having a good-paying job, who were bored in school and left looking for other alternatives than formal education.

In the first group (a) I would include John, 19 years old at the time I met him for an interview. He was a young father who dropped school in the 12th grade when it became clear to him that he would not graduate since he had only half of the credits he needed to earn his diploma. During the interview he appeared hesitant, perhaps a product of low self-esteem. He had no job and was not enrolled in any program. He applied for a GED but had not yet had success. About his motivation to return he said, "... you had to be self-determined," which he was not yet. When I asked him how he saw students who did not attempt to return to school he replied:

> *Possibly from the story of that family. Fathers don't put pride in their sons and daughters, or mothers don't. Maybe, growing up with non-parents, or just sometimes you don't get into the class like you should, maybe the teachers don't think you are good, they don't speak to you as an individual.*

Another extreme case example was provided by Karl. When I talked with him he had been in jail for seven months; he left school in the middle of tenth grade. He was working on an alcohol recovery program and was expecting to be released from jail in about a month. He said he was planning to start a GED program after his release.

In the second group (b) I include teenage mothers who left school and had not yet returned due to the need to care for their baby. For a certain time period, returning to a formal education, if at all valued by the student, had a lower priority than taking care of a baby. Within this category I would also include a student like George, who left high school in the middle of 11th grade. Working an outside job was the main cause of his leaving. He talked to the school dean about returning to school and found that although the possibility existed, he would need more than two years to complete the required credits. He considered a GED program but decided that the job was more important.

In the third group (c) I include dropouts who were good students in school for a certain time but were easily influenced by friends who did not attend school. This combined with being bored in class led to the decision to drop out altogether and start new adventures. Perhaps they felt that their learning capabilities would permit them to complete their formal education at a later date, encouraging them to leave school prematurely. Lea, who dropped out her senior year, is an example:

> *I just thought working was more important than going to school and at the same time I was changing my social scene. A lot of my friends that I have been previously involved with, not in drugs, but parties and stuff like that...[at that time]*

I was working 40-50 hours a week, making what I thought at the time was a lot of money. So I decided to quit school and along with that my parents and I were fighting a lot.

[In school] there was nothing new going on. The only classes that I liked were my business classes and the computers. I have already taken all of those in my sophomore-junior years. So I can't take any of those again. So I was taking English classes that I had had before, basically, they have just given it a new name. It was just boring...I have had the advanced studies, I have already all the classes to get into college, which I didn't want at the time.... I saw work as an escape from school.

Lea could have graduated early if she had seen a challenge in her program. Later when she got information on the GED program and passed a proficiency test, she understood that her knowledge level may have been sufficient to pass the test without taking the courses. At the time of the interview she had not taken the GED exam but said she was planning to do so and later to enroll in college courses. Lea was not the only student I met who was simply bored in school and dropped out to look for new opportunities. In fact, capable students who drop school out of boredom and get jobs have higher chances of succeeding than students from the other two categories identified earlier. For a certain time they may be satisfied and not even be aware of the disadvantages of not having a high school diploma. I met dropouts who advanced in their careers up to a managerial position, and were very satisfied from their accomplishment but these were few indeed. Students from this group were categorized in this study be returnees who at the time the research took place, were already enrolled in college courses.

The majority of the students who did not return to school were those in the first group. For them, returning would have required a great deal of individual effort as well as guidance and support from within the system. The other two groups seem to have better chances of returning to pursue their education. This categorization should be seen only as an effort to better understand students who drop out of school and search for ways to return.

Perhaps there are no major differences between those who return and those who do not, when considering the causes of dropping out. Most of those surveyed who did not return attempted to do so, but circumstances did not work in their favor. Returnees and non-returnees both experienced life without school and learned to value the importance of a formal education. The only difference that can be indicated is that returnees

reached, through their experience, the turning point that helped them make the decision to return, while non-returnees still explored the meaning of being on the outside. In the case of Lea, the returning process was evolving at the time I met her. She asserted that at the moment her friend graduated from high school, she understood that she had to return to the GED course and take the tests.

The results of the telephone-home survey revealed a clear relation between returning to high school or to a GED program and the highest completed grade in high school prior to dropping out.

Table 4: Returning to Education by Highest Grade Level Completed

Highest Grade Completed	Returnees		Non-Returnees		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
8th grade	1	(11)	8	(89)	9	(100)
9th grade	11	(36)	20	(65)	31	(100)
10th grade	29	(52)	27	(48)	56	(100)
11th grade	34	(55)	28	(45)	62	(100)
Total	75		83		158	

Of the nine students who had completed no more than the 8th grade only one returned to school. Of those 31 who had completed the 9th grade, 11 students had returned. Out of 56 who had completed the 10th grade, 29 had returned and of those 62 who had finished the 11th grade, 34 had returned to education. Dropping out of school at an early stage of schooling makes it much more difficult to return to education.

Based on the same survey I also found that out of the 75 returnees, 39 had completed the 10th or 11th grade and returned to a GED program, while only 17 students who had completed the same grades before dropping out, returned to high school. This means that less students opted to return to high school, which seems congruent with the way students perceive returning to high school compared with returning to a GED program, which is the shortest path to graduation.

These findings are supported by the results of a survey of returnees which shows that out of 55 students enrolled in a GED course or who had already graduated through it, only 16 had completed the high school 9th grade or less while 39 students had completed the 10th grade or more. It may, therefore, be concluded that the higher the completed high school class prior to dropping out, the more attractive the GED option becomes when considering returning. This is also compatible with the age variant. Due to the required minimal age (18 years old or more) for taking a GED test, one may expect that younger students, when re-enrolling, will return to high school. The returnees' study revealed, for instance, a median age of 17 for high school returnees with an age range of 15 to 20 and a median age of 20 for GED returnees, with an age range of 16 to 24.

The relation between class completion prior to dropping out and the path returning dropouts may chose, should be cautiously viewed. According to the relationship found and presented above it would have been expected that dropouts who had completed or almost completed the 12th grade would chose to return to a GED program rather than to high school. The results of the telephone-home survey however, revealed a somewhat different trend. Of the seven students who had dropped out of school during the 12th grade, five returned to high school and only two to a GED program. In the returnee survey as well I found four students, 19 and 20 years old, who returned to high school. This may emphasize the importance returnees accord the high school diploma as compared with the GED certificate. It seems that being so close to the completion of high school, makes returning to it, the first option. Three of the students had plans for studying in college and one to enlist in the marines corps. The oldest student was a female, the young mother to a three year-old boy who had been out of school two years.

Counselors: What Do They Say?

In most of the schools I visited I made acquaintance with the principal of the school and then had a longer meeting with the school counselor. While the interviews with principals and teachers were very fruitful, the counselors provided me with a deeper understanding of dropout and returnee issues within the context of the particular school. The perspectives they shared with me, especially those counselors who were also teachers, were of great importance. Their experience as teachers gave some cues as to how helpful effective teaching could be for students who are at risk of dropping out or those who are returning to school.

None of the counselors rejected the possibility of returning to school, but some were rather pessimistic about the returnee students' success:

> *The student that's a year behind, let's say, or a whole semester behind, he's the hard one, because the age difference starts and still it's something that's so far down the road - they haven't had that stick-to-it-iveness anyway and he's the kid who probably doesn't end up getting that diploma....*
>
> *It's not impossible for the student who has dropped out from high school and has been on the outside one month, two months, maybe a semester, to return successfully. But in the realm of probabilities, I don't see it happening very often.*

Regarding returning to school and succeeding, a counselor made the following comment:

> *Returning students can make it if they want to, and they have to want to. Those who have returned [at this school] have gotten help and have made it... decided, "I can make it."*

The same counselor expressed her belief that the school can encourage dropouts to return but there has to be a combined energy of people who want the student to succeed - teachers, counselors and parents. In earlier sections I raised the issue of students' experiences outside school and the necessity of a critical event that brings about the decision to return. While these were not the exact words used by counselors to describe the returning process, they used different examples to explain similar phenomena:

> *Sometimes these kids come back because they get in trouble, and the court says, "You get in school or go to jail." In essence, it's reality that brings them back in here. Being turned down on an application or being turned away from possible employment or even not taken by the service until they get so old, they don't have a diploma, and it strikes a nerve. So, in essence, that turns them back in here. Yet when they come back, they still have to accomplish it.*

The dynamic of returning has been discussed earlier from the viewpoint of the students. Evidence given by counselors supports my hypothesis that a critical event must occur to motivate the dropout to return. Yet the question is: How can the educational system help returnees accomplish the requirements needed for getting their high school diploma? Not all returnees return on their own - some would make such a decision only with guidance or advice. Although truancy is dealt within schools and through truancy officers in the locality, the case with dropouts is different. Once a student has been declared a dropout and formalities carried out, neither the school nor anyone else provides guidance to the student towards other alternatives, such as the GED or vocational training. When I inquired about such a policy a counselor replied: "...they [schools] don't want him. He just goes away. There is no effort to get him back. But

there is a vocational center that has a dropout program." Another counselor, working in a small school from which nine students dropped out the year before the study took place, added:

> *...I am not saying that we are not doing the job, but it becomes a time situation. Of having the time to deal with all of the problems. I would like to see us keep them here and not have them drop first. But if they are returning and they are back in school, I don't think we have anyone who has the time to work and try to get those people back.*

To keep those students in school in the first place would, of course, be ideal. Counselors provided an important insight concerning the particular needs of schools and the teachers who work with those who are at risk to drop as well as those who return. This will be discussed later on.

The policies of schools concerning returnees (as far as I understood them) provide the possibility of returning to school except in extreme cases. Examples of these include students who were expelled or cases in which returning to school is not feasible, as illustrated by a counselor in a truancy program:

> *...yes, if he's over the age of 20 and it has to do with a number of credits. Say he is an 18-year-old ex-student and he has ten credits and you have to stay three more years. It is not likely that anyone would do that. But it varies on the person, if he has a discipline problem or not.*

The age problem and especially the credit problem were discussed in earlier sections - counselors corroborate those conclusions. One of them put it this way:

> *There is another thing, when they come back they want to get [their courses] done as soon as possible [in order to graduate on time with their original class] so they start loading up their schedule. But with a loaded schedule, there is a tendency of not getting work done. The general philosophy here is to pass a kid who shows efforts... this institution is very lenient, I think, in that we will reconstruct class loads, different curriculums, different ways and means to help them get the diploma. To the point where I almost wonder if it is the same quality.*

It seems that school policies try to help returnees readjust to the system, but I also understood that returning to high school means returning to the same point from where the student left, with the exception of having more understanding and tolerance on the part of the teachers. The requirements are still the same requirements and even greater efforts are necessary to make up the credits.

More than one counselor mentioned the problem with academics that returnees face when returning to school, mainly in English, mathematics, sciences and history. The research literature on the causes of dropping out and the characteristics of these students support that contention but schools have developed alternative programs that incorporate much of the academic content in relevant and more meaningful ways. Such an approach is congruent with that said by an experienced counselor:

> *...most likely if they return they are not planning to go to college... they need job skills... they need to see an immediate end. They don't deal with long-term things, goals.*

Even though this counselor impressed me with reference to his leniency and tolerance towards students, he showed much concern about the curriculum quality. During all of my meetings with dropouts and returnees, I realized that they were disappointed with the inflexibility of the system regarding their individual needs versus the school requirements. This is concurs with the counselor's views about the quality of the curriculum.

It should be noted that flexibility does not necessarily mean lowering requirements or the level of performance. The teaching method should change and be more flexible with suitability to the diversity of students' abilities and interests. More responsibility should be delegated to the students in directing and evaluating their own learning. I realized during this study that when a student was given a task to produce an object, they willingly cooperated and enjoyed working together. Today, it is acceptable to strive to produce knowledge rather than acquire it. Perhaps using a combination of multiple learning techniques will elevate the quality of achievements.

The views of counselors on returning make it much clearer that returning to school is indeed possible. But to make returning a successful endeavor, coordinated efforts of the returnees themselves, peers, parents, counselors and teachers is required.

Teachers: How Do They See Returning to Education?

During the course of this study I met twelve teachers, at least one in each of the eleven schools of the county. Some of the teachers had assumed additional responsibilities in schools such as counseling, attendance tasks, etc.

Teachers whom I met had a very clear idea of the evolving process of dropping out and returning to school, as well. Given the fact that only a small number of students return

to high school (the majority return to a GED program), teachers expressed a surprisingly negative view of the success of returnees. Some of them even doubted the sincerity of students returning for an education. This was illustrated by one teacher as follows:

> *Few students have returned; a lot drop out and return only to get a drivers' license. Otherwise they would have to wait until they turn 18.*

Another teacher gave this perspective:

> *...[dropping out] usually begins with an attendance problem. Some transfer to other schools, others get in trouble at home, run away from home, get into trouble with the law and are locked up in jail with probably a court order to return. A lot of court ordered returnees are only there because of the court order. For that reason they attend school--not class. Finally the school has to drop them. A single problem-student's presence in school can cause problems for 20-25 other students.*

This skeptical view of the teachers gives little encouragement to those students who truly intend to return to school. In earlier discussions it was noted that returning was difficult. Teachers' negative attitudes add to that challenge. Perhaps a comment by a student returnee on a questionnaire in reference to his problems makes that more understandable. He said: "[one of the major difficulties was]..." "Trying to get the teacher to take me seriously; letting them know that I am back for good." Regaining confidence or perhaps building a new credible relationship with teachers could be a discouraging task for these students. When I tried to understand why teachers are so hostile towards those who are prone to drop out or those who try to return, I got some possible answers. "In the past, teachers had more time to work with students; nowadays teachers are loaded down, have large classes; time allotted has changed. Drop out kids have a lot of problems which are not necessarily school related."

Another teacher added: "[teachers] teach to middle; teach to average kids. Different ones respond to different treatment. Successful teachers build up some kind of rapport with students."

A third teacher expressed her thoughts concerning the policy of the system as related to returning students and the attitudes of teachers. She said:

> *I really don't think the school district is interested in getting dropouts to return... the cumulative attitude of all teachers within this school is (and it's so different than an elementary attitude), the kid comes into my class; the kid does the work. If*

he doesn't do it, he flunks. If he flunks, tough! He can be here for five years; he can be here for seven years. If he drops out, that's his own fault.

Teachers in high school perceive their task as a subject matter orientation, primarily because they have a relatively short time to teach the material. Classes are overpopulated --which makes it harder. Second, teachers don't believe they have the training or expertise to deal with the problems that characterize students-at-risk (i.e., drop outs and returnees).

...the system cannot be responsive to students' needs--not every one of them--can't do. We have only one guidance counselor for 500 students. Everyone has some problem and needs to have someone to hear him/her. A lot of times this falls on the teacher ...most of us are not equipped to handle students' problems. Kids won't learn--can't learn--until problems are solved.

This we can relate to the student perception which arises repetitively in the study: "Teachers don't care." Students want to see the teachers as persons who are taking care of, not only their academic development, but also their needs as human beings. Perhaps they don't express that in such terms, but it appears that those young students are sensitive to the many facets of what the educator represents. The question of whether it is possible to differentiate between the tasks of those who are teaching and the tasks of those who provide an affective, supportive and responsive climate for learning in school, becomes of paramount importance.

Principals of Schools: What Do They Say?

I didn't find any policy in schools that prevents drop-outs from returning to school, should they choose to do so. Nevertheless, I learned very little about any policy that established any contact with drop-out students that might encourage or attract them to return to school. Almost all ten principals I met for interviews admitted that "contact with drop-outs is almost incidental," or that "no real assistance for returning students is provided." It seems that principals have strong opinions about returning and these are based on their experience in running schools.

How do principals perceive returning?:

...When they drop out the class moves on. When they return, they have to return to where they left off; sometimes it is a stigma problem. It is a problem for those who miss credits, ...very few attempt to return.

...Usually when they drop out they are unmotivated; many are over-age for classes they are in. They make a decision to come back two, three, or four years down the road. Then they are older than the graduating seniors. Lagging behind in terms of credits becomes a problem. But school could be flexible, adapting requirements.

Another principal remarked:

Returning students will be accepted, [but we] don't feel we need to alter graduation requirements. [But] returnees can't return to the same system, because he/she will fail again.

A fourth principal reinforced these concepts, asserting:

Students who return usually do so because they have been passed over for a job promotion, or, after being on their own, couldn't handle the pressure. When a student returns to school, he/she has to play by school rules. It's as simple as that! There are scheduled classes to attend to earn credits for graduation.

This principal believes that drop-outs are not motivated enough to make the "return" decision. They need a push, and encouragement from family and friends. Such encouragement may not be available from the public school.

Why did principals express such negative perspectives on school returnees? The answer to this question seems to be a combination of several factors.

1. There is little hope that a student returning to the same system will succeed.

2. Home environment is crucial in motivating students to function successfully. Educators cannot influence parents. Attitudes of society need to change.

3. The priorities of schools, in terms of funds, are directed toward those who want to do--who are able to do what they need to succeed.

4. Teachers are too busy teaching, and are not prepared or trained to deal with the specific needs of drop-outs or returnees.

One of the principals expanded on the belief mentioned in the first point as follows:

Dropout students develop defeatist attitudes because they won't help themselves. Drop-outs don't show up; don't have commitment to follow through.

Another principal explained:

...Drop-outs returning to class need an individualized plan; they need so many hours to meet goals prescribed with each step ...Counseling is important. School is not structured to provide education to dropout groups. Very few are returning to high school because of failure. Students need to seek help. Many times it's too late to help kids already set in their ways--in home, in life.

Home environment as a factor that determines the success of students in school was cited by teachers, counselors, and principals more than once. In regard to this I collected several different examples.

They need a role model. One out of three of our students come from a single parent family. It's not that these parents don't care, but so many times they don't have the time. Or they work two jobs to try to support that family, and there is no one at home for that kid. Or they work the second shift when the kid's home, and there's really no one there. And that's how a lot of them get into trouble. That's how they get involved with other groups or people who may lead them astray. Birds of a flock stick together; I guess that's what I am trying to say. But they need that role model, they need that adult that they can turn to.

In the opinion of one principal the priorities of schools should be directed to those students who conform to the system and cooperate with teachers, those who are promising when looking to the future. Another individual observed:

...right now funds are being cut for students who do want to do who do what they need to do to succeed ...they are the ones who will be our community leaders, politicians. As school districts go deeper and deeper in debt, which group do we save?

Other principals expressed the need for school to cope successfully with students with specific needs, and perhaps with students in general as well. As many teachers believe, and principals support the premise, a personal interaction with students is needed: "we need teachers, not machines. We need small enough classes so that people will have time to work with students," they declare.

Having smaller classes was cited more than once. This, of course, has a financial aspect that school districts can little afford.

The final point in reference to the teachers' obligation was made clear to me as follows: "School responsibility is not to straighten out kids, but to teach them."

Another principal hypothesized that schools are too subject-matter oriented, due to the pressures to raise standards. He asserted: "...there's no question that striving for

excellence has probably increased teachers to be more subject oriented. Expectations from the school board--one of the goals that I was given were to increase test scores."

According to this principal, there is a strong need to reduce the amount of lecturing and to increase student involvement. Improving the methodology may attract more of the students and increase attendance.

Almost all principals I interviewed supported the need for an alternative program. Not surprisingly, such an alternative was considered critical, possibly situated somewhere nearby the community college, where the opportunity to implement different rules would not interfere with the regular setting. They also recommended that in such an alternative program the supportive components would be introduced such as extensive counseling, individual learning, life skills, etc. Graduation requirements should include: a minimum competency component of basic skills, life skills, and a vocational component.

I was informed that there are plans to introduce an alternative program into one of the schools which will provide an "after school program" where students will be afforded the opportunity to complete course requirements with a flexible time table. Such a program may also provide an opening for students to work and complete graduation requirements for a high school diploma.

Two important issues arise on the basis of the principals' attitudes toward returnees. The first is whether segregating drop-out-returnees to an out of school program might not create a new marginal group of students being at risk to drop-out, given the fact that teaching is subject-matter oriented and directed to "those who want and do?"

The second issue is whether creating alternatives out-of-school risks splitting the educational system to two categories of institutions, those for students who conform to rules and those who are designed for students with special needs that a regular setting with its own resources and staff cannot provide to them.

Summary

The intent of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of returning of high school dropouts, focusing on the various meanings attributed by those who returned to education and by those who did not, and to identify the different views of those involved in the process of returning.

- To better understand the evolving decision of returning to school, it was important to understand the meaning of being on the outside. Being bored, unconnected and sometimes rejected, feeling shame, regret and failure, feeling uneasy about being a teenage parent, missing friends and school related activities were among the most disappointing occurrences encountered by dropouts, while on the outside. Few of them experienced even minimal success at work, in starting a family or having a good time. It is within this context that dropout returnees experienced some kind of pivotal event or epiphany realization, that led them to return to school. For some, it was the moment they realized that without education they could go nowhere; for others it was the example of a friend who had successfully returned to school. In some cases it was a sense of responsibility associated with the birth of a child. Returnees reported changes in personal views and attitudes occurring between dropping out and returning. Among these were: attaining a clear goal in mind, feeling more mature, assuming responsibility for self or for a child, being strongly motivated to accomplish a goal, feeling independent, valuing money, becoming decisive. It is with these two, apparently related, components, a critical incident and the growth of understanding, that the decision to return to education was formulated.

- The meaning dropouts attributed to the process of returning. For those who returned to high school, it meant returning to the same environment they had left, in many cases with memories of failure and frustration. Those who had made the decision on their own, that is, were not in effect forced by someone else to re-enroll in school, were more decisive in doing so, and were more confident in accomplishing their goals. I met a small number of teenage mothers who, when leaving school, were almost certain they would return after giving birth. Returning specifically to high school seemed to have numerous drawbacks. It intended to be more time consuming; it

required some effort to readjust to school discipline, study habits and other school routines. The stigma and the feeling of shame for past conduct were, sometimes, unavoidable. It was therefore not surprising that, out of 75 returnees, only 26 (35%) returned to high school while forty five others (60%) returned to a GED program. The latter was considered a shorter option leading to high school graduation equivalency, and more flexible in terms of schedule, with a personal approach to the students. Although none of the returnees viewed the GED as giving them a set of "clear goals," it was obvious why, within the context of returning, this program was more attractive to the majority. Returning to school or to a GED program was not an emancipation from worries. Family commitments, fear of renewed failure, teacher-student or student-teacher related problems were of concern and the academic challenge was perhaps the most significant one for them. These considerations required an understandable effort on the students' part, when returning.

- The issue of why some dropouts do not return to education was examined from two perspectives: one from the point of view of peers who remained in school, and the second was given by students who did not experience returning. Those who remained in school believed that it is possible to return to school, but that it is extremely difficult. One needs to be quite serious in order to succeed. Returning is a matter of building a new self-image, which is not an easy task. Returnees should not expect teacher and classmates to be more helpful than they had previously been. Moreover, the peer influence from the outside may not contribute to a returning decision. In addition, the returning of teenage mothers may be postponed for a longer period of time, unless they are provided parental assistance or a day care facility. Three different groups were identified among those who did not return to education. In the first group I found students for whom the circumstances of dropping out were so severe or complicated that returning was almost impossible. Being older than regular high school students, being deeply involved in drugs or alcohol, or extreme cases of delinquency, are serious obstacles for returning. In the second group I included teenage mothers who did not return to school, due to the need to care for their babies. Others in this group put working and making money as first priority. Being successful in a job may indeed postpone returning, to a later time. Other students in this category might have considered returning to school, but no one urged or guided them

to do so, "I never thought about returning" some said. In the third category, I identified students who were sometimes high achievers and/or found school not challenging enough, they were "bored in school," they said. At a certain time these students were influenced by friends, who did not attend school, to look for "attractive adventures." These students may sometimes return to an alternative program, such as the GED, even having college plans in mind. The results of this study have demonstrated that even youth who are easy to approach need advice, some guidance, and a push to make the decision to return. The conditioning on the outside and the changes developing in the student's personality provide the timelines for returning. What is required is the critical event, the idea, perhaps from an outsider, insight that suddenly emerges and brings about the decision to return to education. In a system where dropouts are unconnected, uncounseled, whatever the causes, we risk losing even those "accessible" youths. Many dropouts with whom I talked admitted that no one contacted them after they left school. Hahn et al. (1987) recommended keeping in touch with dropouts, saying: "Genuine solutions for troubled young people [estranged] will require linkages between the various service delivery agencies and also require some form of coordinated case management" (p. 53). As shown in this study, parents and boy or girl friend should play a crucial role in helping students to return to school. They should be seen as additional agents in such a coordinated case management.

- I didn't find any policy in schools that prevents drop-outs from returning to school, should they choose to do so. Nevertheless, I learned very little about any policy that established any contact with dropout students that might encourage or attract them to return to school. Moreover while I documented expressions of returning students reflecting changes in their attitudes, motivation and willingness to begin anew, teachers and principals, although they expressed an understanding point of view, in practice, did not change their attitudes towards the returnees. As one principal stated "...When they drop out, the class moves on. When they return, they have to return to where they left off." It is apparent that the school system does not define itself as an educational system assuming the burden of educating all, rather than only those who conform, namely, conventional students. Some educators in school expressed the need to successfully cope with students with specific needs. Teachers admit in fact

that they are subject matter oriented, in their approach, or they will not be able to complete the curriculum requirements. At this point it seems that school systems should confront the crucial question of the meaning of graduation. At a conference held for directors and leaders of large plants and businesses, the expected needs of manpower in the year 2000 was presented. Manpower would require multiple skills, knowing how to gain access to knowledge and information, skills in problem solving, computer literacy, having humanitarian skills and values and communicative. They need to be able to work in teams, to listen and have the ability to differentiate and make decisions. Obviously, school curriculum that emphasizes knowledge content will not necessarily provide these skills and address these requirements. Students should experience these skills by means of knowledge content. Educational policies in school should be reconsidered while adopting recent trends in teaching and learning (i.e., emphasizing learning processes, construction of meanings, developing metacognitive skills, experiencing authentic problem solving, self assessment, peer assessment and parent assessment and developing reflective skills during the learning process (see for example, Darling-Hamond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995). A new type of student-teacher relationship should be established. Rutter (1988) for example, claims that programs can affect student performance when teachers assume the extended roles of counselor, confident and friend, and efforts are made to bond the students to the school, to the teaching staff and to one another. Tuck (1993) recommends to implement cooperative learning, group work and peer coaching. Students should be taught less, participate more in making learning decisions, establish standards and monitor their own progress.

The Educational Importance of the Study

It is expected that this comprehensive study will contribute to the understanding and awareness of the complex issues related to "returning to education." School and county policies should be revised to ensure, mainly, the following:

- Teachers and instructors in educational settings should be trained to implement new approaches in teaching methods, to create a supportive, motivating, creative and cooperative learning environment.

- A variety of approaches, and programs are necessary to respond to different needs of returnees. In school solutions, to keep students in school and to encourage returning should be considered as first priority.

- Large schools may consider encouraging the setting of small units thereby creating a sense of community among students.

- Revised policies at the county level are necessary to encourage returning to education (effective networks for reaching out to dropouts and to keep in contact with them).

- Alternative programs, out of school, should be developed on an integrated basis, combining the academics required for a high school diploma, basic skills and job training.

- Alternative programs as such, should be operated in a prestigious setting using modern, educational and industrial technologies.

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